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ABSTRACT

To understand the nature of talk in small group writing workshops, including the way talk changes over time and the use students make of such talk, a study analyzed the conversations of 17 inexperienced college writers as they composed and revised self-selected pieces during a one-semester composition course. A student from the course who did not participate in a writing group was selected to analyze tape recordings of the group sessions. The recorded conversation was divided into four categories: (1) talk in response to the pieces, (2) talk to establish the emotional climate, (3) talk to move the group along, and (4) talk addressed to the listeners of the tape. Results of the analysis suggested that the largest category, talk in response to the group members' papers, remained the same or increased over time, while talk addressed to the listeners of the tape disappeared over time. The use of conversation to help one another clarify ideas varied from session to session, but there is evidence in later papers that the students' writing had benefited from more careful thinking and peer evaluation. The study reaffirms the potential value of small group response sessions in the classroom. (Thirty-six references are included.) (JC)

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ED285154

An Ethnographic Investigation of Talk in Small Group Writing Workshops in a College Writing Class

Research Conducted at:

State University of New York at Buffalo

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Abstract

This study describes fully-contextualized the talk of inexperienced college writers in small group writing workshops as they compose and revise self-selected pieces for a college writing class. Three central questions guided the study. The first question focused on the nature of talk in small groups. Four categories of talk emerged. The first and largest category was talk in response to the papers. The second largest category was talk that established the emotional climate. The third category consisted of talk that moved the group along. The fourth and smallest category was talk addressed to the listeners of the tape. The second question concerned how the talk changed over time. There was evidence of change in the amount of talk in each category. Talk in response to the papers, while always the largest category, either remained the same or increased over time. Talk addressed to the listeners of the tape disappeared over time.The third question addressed the issue of the use students make of the talk. Use varied. The study confirmed the benefit of small group interaction for the writer, but in addition, the study brings into focus the value of the other half of the speaking-listening connection; that is, the way in which a writer uses his or her own talk to mediate between thinking and writing.

While the use of peer writing groups has become a widely accepted practice in writing classrooms, such use has not emerged from a clearly defined theory on language, learning, or human interaction. The classroom practice has moved forward without any clear theoretical underpinnings. The advantages offered over the years have ranged from the role of small groups in preparing students to live in a democracy (Marsh, 1916) to a 1956 proposal for the use of small groups as a way to decrease the teacher's paper load (Laird, 1970). In the sixties, largely due to the influence of the Dartmouth Conference discussed by Dixon (1975) and the publication of two influential books by James Moffett (1968), small writing groups were widely recommended as a way to encourage student-centered learning and as a way to provide students with an audience other than the teacher for their writing. The seventies saw many comparison group studies testing the effectiveness of classrooms organized into small groups against the effectiveness of more traditionally organized classes. LaGana (1972), Marsh (1975), Farrell (1977), and Benson (1979) all reported in favor of the classes using group work.

However, there has been little research that has examined what is actually said during small group interactions. (Notable exceptions include Danis, 1980; Gere

and Abbott, 1985). Kantor, Kirby and Goetz (1981) have suggested a need for more research that turns to primary sources for insights. Accordingly, the present study engages in basic research using an ethnographic methodology to examine what is said during writing response groups. In this study, small group writing workshops are defined as a group of from three to five students who meet regularly during class to discuss the pieces they are writing. The groups may be used for all phases of the composing process from idea generating and finding a topic through revision and editing.

Much literature supports the use of small groups within the classroom (Murray, 1968 and 1978; Moffett, 1968; Elbow, 1973 and 1981; Cooper, 1975; Beaven, 1977; Macrorie, 1979; Bruffee, 1980). Other literature offers practical suggestions for using small groups in the classroom (Sax and Hollander, 1972; Stanford and Stanford, 1969; Hawkins, 1976; Healy,1980; Moberg, 1983). There are differences in the advice theorists offer, but a common thread running through each of them is the concession that while groups can have enormous value in the writing classroom, there can be difficulty in making them work.

Many of the doubts both teachers and theorists express concerning the use of groups center on the talk. What are students saying to one another? And, are they using the

talk in writing and in learning to write?

The present study was guided by three central questions. First, what is the nature of student talk in small writing group sessions? Second, does that talk change over time, and if so, in what ways? Third, what use do students make of the talk?

Setting for the Study

The study was conducted over the course of one full semester in a college writing class. The class consisted of seventeen inexperienced writers. Some of the students were required to take the course based on their performance on a university wide writing placement test given to all incoming students. Other students who perceived themselves to be inadequate writers elected the course. The term inexperienced writer is used to describe all of the writers in the class; that is, they are writers who have not confronted and solved the problems of composing often enough to have developed successful strategies for writing.

Methodology

According to Gearing (1979) ethnography is a science that is both descriptive and analytic of human behavior. The researcher seeks to understand events "from the inside" by observing and "from the outside" by analyzing the patterns of such interactions. The use of ethnographic approaches to studying language use offers much promise for

researchers in composition. However, since the term ethnographic method does not represent a single, well-defined approach, it is necessary for research reports using such methods to include a careful accounting of the procedure used (Gilmore & Smith, 1982; Green & Wallet,1981; Heath, 1982)

The ethnographic interviewing procedure used in this study is based on the work of Madelaine Mathiot (1980), a linguist specializing in conversational analysis. Mathiot's ethnographic interviewing technique is particularly well suited for micro-analysis; that is, investigations that are primarily concerned with the events of a face-to-face interaction, and only more generally concerned with the larger context within which they occur.

The study did not begin with categories pre-determined by the analyst, but instead native categories were generated through interviews with a respondent. The procedure began with the selection of a respondent who was a member of the culture. In this case, Brian, a member of the writing class, but not a member of any of the small groups analyzed in the study, was selected.

After I had transcribed the audiotape of one of the group's early meetings, I began the work with Brian. During the first meeting, Brian was asked to read the transcript as he listened to the audiotape of the group meeting. I

prompted his response with the probe, "Tell me what is going on." I then audiotaped his response.

At our next session, I gave him a transcript of his own response to the original tape. I asked him to mark off or "chunk" what he had said into different kinds of information, marking the points in the text where the information seemed to change.

After he had done this, I asked him to label the various "chunks". For example, the first part of Brian's commentary after he had listened to the small group began this way:

> When he [Cliff] first started, after he read his piece and he asked, "How was it gang?" gang has a small group type of familiarity to it and I noticed all through it instances of where people are reassuring each other...

Brian "chunked" this first section indicating that it was different from what followed. When I asked what he would call this, he labeled it "familiarity". We continued in this manner until Brian had chunked and labeled his entire manuscript.

At our next session, I put the respondent's categories on cards. We built a hierarchy of his categories as I asked him to name the larger and the smaller category for each. In this way we discerned superordinate categories as well

as for subcategories of each of his terms. I also was able to determine when he had used another term for what was in effect the same category. Through follow-up interviews, Brian's categories became refined. "Familiarity" eventually became part of the larger category that he later labeled "how comfortable they feel" and then eventually further abstracted to "talk that establishes the climate," allowing for the possibility that it was not always comfortable and familiar. Brian's final category was a superordinate category that allowed for the inclusion of talk that could also show a group's discomfort with each other.

Through continued interviewing, the respondent was eventually able to distinguish four superordinate categories that accounted for all of the group conversation. The four categories were: talk in response to the pieces; talk to establish the emotional climate; talk to move the group along; and talk addressed to the listeners of the tape. Every utterance during the group sessions could be categorized into one of the superordinate categories.

Using these categories I was able to map an activity structure and a climate structure for each group in the study. An activity structure reflects the actions in which people are engaged. It is what usually occurs--what happens. The climate structure is more elusive. It has to

do with the feelings people have about what is going on. It is the pattern of emotional engagement and disengagement at various points during the interaction.

The four superordinate categories that I was able to label with the help of the respondent allowed me to account for all talk in the small groups. With all talk labeled, I was able to calculate percentages of each of the kinds of talk occuring.

Design of the Study

A methodological triangulation was used in the study to develop as accurate and as full a description as possible. All small groups ocurring in the class over the semester were audiotaped; I used ethnographic interviewing and self reporting logs written by the students to obtain their perception of the event; I collected all student writing discussed in the groups complete with drafts. The analysis of the tapes became the primary source for the data with the student-kept logs and the student writing complementing the information uncovered in the ethnographic interviews. The data included the actual speech event; the interpretation of the event by members of the culture; and the actual writing including all drafts discussed during the small group sessions.

Two of the five groups that usually formed were analyzed. The first group was selected for close study

because it seemed unusual in its stability. Membership in this group did not change as it did in the other groups. When I asked why they did not change to other groups all the members reported the group as being "comfortable." I was curious about how such a group operated. I began the analysis with an early session of that group. To discover change over time I also analyzed a late session of the same group.

Because we see what something is by determining the ways in which it differs from something else, I chose a second group to contrast with the first. While the first group had the most stable membership of any in the class, the second group had only two consistent members. The three other places in the group were occupied by various other students from a pool of five possibilities. It was the membership difference that first suggested them as contrasting groups. Members of the groups did not see themselves as a more successful and a less successful group. The respondent, however, did see the first group as "more serious" than the second group.

Results

Since the study was guided by three central questions, the results will be reported for each of the three questions--the nature of the talk; the change over time; and the use students made of the talk.

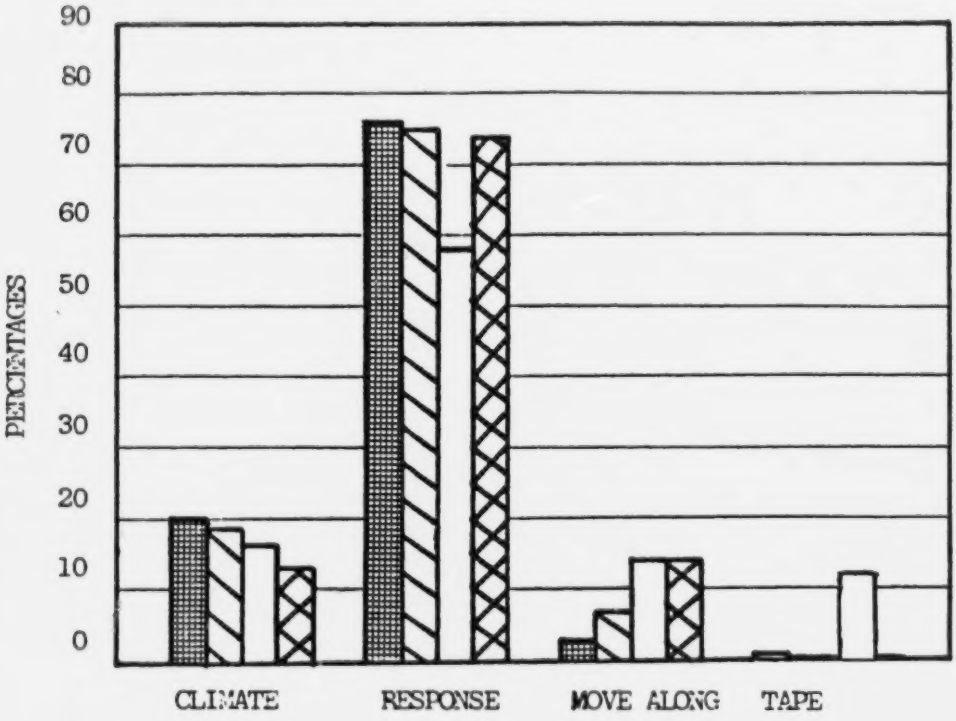
Nature of the talk. The four categories of talk that emerged from the ethnographic interviewing did not occur with equal frequency. Clearly, in both groups during early and late sessions, the greatest percentage of talk is in the category "response to the writing."

In the first group, about three quarters of the talk in both early and late sessions is talk in response to the writing (See Figure 1). In the second group, during the early session 58% of the talk is in response to the pieces, but in the late session it has risen to 73%. The talk in this category is talk that might generally be viewed as talk on task. It is reassuring that students in this study talked about their writing more than they engaged in any other kind of talk, but it is not until the subcategories are explored that the nature of this talk emerges.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Subcategories. In the first session of the first group, Brian labeled nine subcategories. As he began to discover the subcategories, Brian commented, "They're using the group like a writer's think tank." The labeling of the subcategories anchors his observation in data. The subcategories are the ways in which group members talked to each other about their writing. To illustrate the

Figure 1



GROUP ONE AND TWO - EARLY AND LATE TALK

GROUP ONE - EARLY

GROUP ONE - LATE

GROUP TWO - EARLY

GROUP TWO - LATE

subcategories as well as to give a flavor of the sessions examples of the subcategories are included.

1-The first subcategory of response Brian labels "putting a piece together from smaller pieces to a larger one." Brian observes:

> I noticed they all had a bunch, well except for Cliff his was all one straight piece, but the other two I noticed they had chunks, different chunks of work that were related, but not put together. It was like an unfinished piece.

The conversation about Alan's piece is a good example of this subcategory.

> Alan: All right my story is about this girl named Cathy who's...I never went out with her or anything, but she was just my friend. I got two parts. One part is like when I first really started to notice her and the other is like the general part. Well, you'll see. [He reads.] "Cathy used to be unpleasant to be around..."
>
> Alan: Okay, that's like one part [then he reads] "Years later however, after receiving an invitation to a prestigious party..."
>
> Alan: And then I got another part [He reads] "Cathy started to grow on me..."
>
> Alan: And then this is my fourth part, this is

like totally different. [He reads] "Cathy"...like I just tried to instead of just trying to tell you more of what she's like, I describe her, "Cathy's a very caring individual who'll listen to anyone..."

Alan has tried several approaches. He is using the group to help him decide whether or not the approaches are all part of the same piece. Putting the pieces together seems to be an issue of finding a form appropriate for the writer's intent.

2-The second subcategory Brian called "helping them to get a scope on what the paper is about." As the analyst I would call this category establishing a purpose for the piece. Brian sees an example of this category in an exchange between Kim and Alan.

Alan: I like the first two pages best. It's more like Cliff's and it doesn't, you know, the other paper describes more of Wes than you and your grandmother.

Kim: Yeah, I figured if they're gonna get married, you are going to want to see them both.

Alan: Yeah, but Cliff doesn't describe his aunt [In his piece about his uncle].

Cliff: Come to think of it I didn't. You think I ought to describe her?

Alan: No I...

Kim: No, it was about your uncle

Alan: I think you should stick with the grandmother

Kim: You think I should stick with the grandmother and not combine it with the wedding?

Alan: I think if you put anybody in, it should be an experience about you and your grandmother

Cliff:Yeah

It is interesting that Kim can so clearly see what belongs in Cliff's piece, but has not seen so clearly what information is appropriate for her own piece. Brian observes, "They tell her it would be nice to put in an experience about her and her grandmother because that's what she wants to write about."

When I asked Brian about the difference between the first two categories, he explained that the first had to do with thinking about the connections between incidents while the second has to do with thinking about how some incidents do not contribute to the main point of the story.

3-The third subcategory Brian labels "reassuring." The category is exemplified by Cliff's comment to Alan after Alan has read his four parts about his friend, Cathy. "I got a good picture of her, now if you just like connected it all together."

4-The fourth category, Brian labels "helpful criticism." Alan and Cliff suggest what Kim should consider leaving out of her piece.

Alan: Wes kind of gets off the track

Cliff: Yeah, come to think of it he does

Alan: And so does... Florida kind of gets off the track a little too. It's mainly just describing a person and we are supposed to understand and like that person too.

They identify specific parts that do not work explaining why.

5-Brian calls the fifth category "finetuning." Brian describes this as talk that "tries to get it just right." An example of this occurs when Alan is reading a piece.

Alan: We used more water than a horse would have drank if you would have rode...[He has trouble saying it. Laughter]

Cliff: If we would have rode?...if we would have ridden. Would that work?

Alan: If we would have had ridden...

Cliff:No, if we would have ridden

Alan: If we would have had ridden?

Cliff: If we would have ridden [laughter]

It is a verb tense problem that the group works on.

6-The sixth subcategory of talk Brian calls "clarification." Listeners tell the reader what they have heard or understood from what the writer has written.

> Kim: See, I went into this thing about Florida because I thought it might sort of describe the kind of grandmother, person that she is. My other grandmother, if my grandfather died no way would she
>
> Cliff: No way would she
>
> Kim: Marry again
>
> Cliff: Yeah
>
> Kim: Or even think of traveling around
>
> Alan: Uh..huh
>
> Cliff: That kind of points out something too I think. She's not really a swinger or anything. I think she is just like more outgoing. That's how I see her.

Cliff clarifies for Kim the image of her grandmother that he is getting from her piece.

7-The seventh subcategory is "asking advice." The writer determines an area or an issue for response.

> Alan: Well, I was talking to her [the teacher] before class and the reason I didn't know at first ... I thought this part was going to be too boring. Is it?

Cliff: Which one?

Alan: The first one

Cliff: About you dating her and that? That was funny. I like that part. [Cliff laughs]

Alan: Well, when I first started I thought I was going to get really corny and really boring

Cliff: Now I like that one better than the other one really

Alan: Uh...huh

Kim: I like the other one too

The discussion continues with Alan getting feedback on the two parts of his story.

8-The eighth subcategory Brian calls, "thinking about advice from the teacher."

Alan: Yeah, she [the teacher] said...what she told me was that this way it really isn't giving the readers a lot of credit. She said like I could just keep giving these little instances and tie it together in such a way that they would know this.

Alan tries out a response he has gotten from the teacher on the group. They discuss it.

9-The ninth subcategory of talk Brian labels "visualization". In this subcategory group members use the group to explore an idea that is not currently written in

the piece. This category will be discussed more fully in the section discussing the use the group makes of the talk.

The second group. While the same four superordinate categories appear in the second group, only five of the nine subcategories of the response talk appear. In the second group there is no talk in the categories: putting a piece together; getting a scope on the paper; asking advice; visualization. A new category appears, "arguing with the writer." An example of talk in this category occurs when Tracy is responding to Michael's piece.

Tracy: What is a sully?

Michael: A sully is just a short excursion or a short journey, just a short walk

Tracy:Oh yeah? I din't know what that meant

Michael: If they don't know it, they'll have to look it up, you know that's

Tracy: Do you think that's a good word to use in this way?

Michael: Sure I do

Tracy: All right

Michael: Sure I do. It's a jaunt, a sully is also described as a jaunt and I use jaunt in there and a sully is...

Tracy: Okay then. Okay.

Michael: I think sully is a very good English

word. It should be used and recognized.

Tracy: Fine with me. I just don't like it

There is a confrontation over Michael's word use. Tracy wants Michael to change it; Michael does not want to. While inappropriate word choice is a difficulty in this paper, Tracy's response does not result in any change in Michael's text.

While both groups spend more of their time on talk in response to the writing, the second group has spent less time--58% compared to 73% for the first group. The second group's talk does not cover the range of subcategories that the first group does. In the second group there is no talk in the categories: putting a piece together; getting a scope on the paper; asking advice; visualization. The categories not included represent higher level writing concerns of arrangement, purpose, and generating information for a piece.

Talk to Establish the Climate

The second largest category of talk in the first group was talk to establish the emotional climate. On a surface level, the 20% of the talk in this category might be viewed as talk off task. The ethnographic analysis however, uncovers a significant role for this talk in the functioning of the group.

From the interviews I was able to construct an

activity structure and a climate structure for each of the group sessions. The concept of turn taking is very much part of the first group's interactions (See Figure 2). The turn begins with the student choosing to read, followed by response from the other members. The turn ends followed by a transition to the next turn. It was at the transition points that students used the talk Brian had identified as "climate" talk.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The climate structure changes at the transition points from one turn to the next. The level of personal engagement shifts. The climate talk is characterized by informal language, often laughter, and more emotional engagement than during the turns when the students are discussing the writing. The climate structure underpins the group interaction.

In their logs students frequently expressed a desire to feel comfortable in the small groups. Such information does not move us beyond what many teachers might intuitively sense until we combine it with the information from ethnography. The "feeling comfortable" of this group is acted out by the pattern of climate talk emerging as the group shifts from one activity to the next. Ethnography can

Figure 2

FIRST GROUP-EARLY SESSION

Activity Structure		Climate Structure	
Activity	Kind of Talk	Engagement	Example
Turn #1	Cliff reads	neutral	
Transition	Move along talk	positive	How was it gang?
	Talk in response to the writing	neutral	
Transition	Move along talk	positive	You'll get bored with mine
Turn #2	Kim reads	neutral	
	Talk in response to the writing	neutral	
Transition	Talk to the tape	positive	Alan is nodding his head
Interlude	Talk to establish emotional climate	positive	Cliff & Kim extended conversation
Turn #3	Alan reads	neutral	
	Talk in response	neutral	
Real Turn	Talk in response	positive	Have you ever been to Akron Falls?
End	climate	positive	laughter
			Or people tell me don't go running at night.

make conscious what members of a culture may know at a subconscious level.

In the second group the climate structure is more often negative or neutral. Brian alludes to the difference he senses:

> It's lacking a bit [the second group, first session]. it's hard to comment on something like this because it's more negative. I don't think it was useless or anything like that, but they just don't budget their time like that first group. There's plenty of time when that first group isn't talking about the writing, but they budget their time more correctly than this group.

As I began to map the activity and climate structure it became clear that the concept of turn is not the same for this group as it is for the first group. Tracy, the first reader begins by reading to the group. After she has read, only one member, Michael responds to her reading. The other two members Dawn and Leisa talk about Dawn's paper. There are two "turns" occuring simultaneously. Later, the group decides not to respond to Dawn's paper because they have heard it in a full class response session. Even though Dawn says she has made changes the group acts out a notion of turn that requires bringing a new piece each time.

Climate talk accounts for 16% of the talk in this

group. There is not a clear movement from one turn to the next and the engagement during transitions does not have the comfortable climate structure of the first group. The climate talk is most often neutral and is even occasionally negative during an engagement.

Beaven (1977) has suggested that about half the time in groups is spent on response to the papers and half on process. This study suggests that it is not simply an issue of one kind of talk versus another, but rather a question of how the kinds of talk are interwoven. Talk to establish the emotional climate may be said to function as the social glue of the group creating the context for the talk about the pieces.

Talk to Move the Group Along

Talk in this category made up only 3% of the talk in the first group. Early in the first tape Alan's response to Kim is an example of this kind of talk. Alan urges Kim to respond more fully to the piece. She comments that she thinks Cliff's piece is good then shifts the response to Alan by asking him what he thinks. He does not simply answer her question, but allows her a chance to be more specific in her response, by urging her to tell Cliff why she thinks Alan's piece is good. Alan helps to assure that Cliff gets response to his piece. He take some responsibilty for helping the group to do what it is set up

to do.

In the second group "move along talk" comprises 14% of the talk. When totals for both sessions of the first group in the categories of climate talk and move along talk are totaled and compared to the second group, the result shows a difference in the two groups. For the first group combined there is 38% of the talk in the category climate talk with only 10% of total talk in the move along category. The total talk for both sessions of the second group indicates less talk (29%) in the climate category than the first group and more talk (28%) in the move along category. The difference may be connected to the difference in the notions of turn which may indicate that the members have not internalized the function of the group as well as the first group has.

Talk to the Listeners of the Tape

The fourth category of talk does not occur frequently in the first group; 1% of the talk is in this category. An example of this talk occurs when Kim has finished her piece and Alan has agreed to go next. Alan cannot find his paper right away. Cliff says into the recorder, "Alan is looking for his paper." Kim and Cliff become engaged in some talk that is unrelated to the pieces the respondent later labels

as the interlude. It is a very positive engagement, but as soon as Alan has found his paper the talk stops and the group returns to the task of responding to Alan's paper. As Brian says it "fills dead air" because it stops immediately when Alan finds his paper.

At first it appeared that the category of talk to the listeners of the tape was emerging simply as an effect of the study. When the early tapes were made, it is possible that students were conscious of the tape recorder. However, results from the second group suggest that this explanation may be too simple.

In the second group the tape talk makes up 12% of the talk. Each turn begins with an introduction of the reader into the tape recorder. When Tracy begins Leisa says loudly into the recorder, "Tracy E. to read her story." This is repeated for each of the other readers. Examples of talk to the tape recorder are sprinkled throughout the transcript. Leisa later comments into the recorder, "See I am talking." It may be awareness of the tape recorder that calls this talk out, however it also suggests the purpose as perceived by the group. The tape recorder seems to function as a surrogate for the teacher who is absent from the group. Everyone in the class has received the same explanation of the purpose for the taping, but the concern over the tape plays a much larger role in the second group than it does

in the first.

Change Over Time

One of the most interesting aspects of the change over time is the increased autonomy and the internalized purpose for the group that are acted out. One of the claims that Murray (1968) has made for small responding groups that creates difficulty for writing teachers centers on student autonomy.

> They(students) also need to know that they have the primary responsibility to teach themselves to write, and that they are capable, through re-evaluation and revision of their papers, of solving their own writing problems. (p.133)

Teachers have often been troubled by this claim. Do students in small group writing workshops come to accept this responsibilty for their learning? Both of the groups in this study move in that direction through the small group sessions, although there is more evidence of this in the first group than in the second.

By the late session nearly three quarters of the talk in both groups is in response to the pieces. However, it is within the notion of turn that increased student autonomy and internalized purpose for the group are most clearly acted out.

In the late session of the first group, Kim brings two

different pieces that she is working on to the group for response. Kim took the first turn with almost no move along talk to get her started.

Cliff: Well, who wants to start?

Ken: (to Kim) You got something?

Kim: I've got the one about my ankle. I changed the beginning. And my poetry one too. I've got that.

Her turn becomes read/response/read response. Kim clearly initiates having the group respond to two of her pieces. This is not something that the teacher has required or even suggested. Kim seems to be using the group for her own purpose; to improve these pieces by sharing them during the small group session.

Both Ken and Alan read from pieces that they have brought to the group for response, but during the course of the small group session read earlier drafts as well. In Alan's case after he finishes reading the draft he has brought to the group, he is prompted to go back to an earlier draft.

Alan finishes reading

Cliff: No, seriously, you say you stayed to protect the contents

Alan: Yeah?

Cliff: What if you say clothes or something like

that. Contents sounds so professional.

Ken: Yeah.

Alan: Let me read my first draft. I think maybe I should put that back in.

Alan reads an earlier draft. His reading is followed by enthusiasm and questioning from the group. Alan's final draft contains the section that he reads to the group from the first draft that he had rejected before the group meeting.

Ken hesitates to share his piece about Bourban Street commenting, "Okay. I'll read this. I think it's gonna get scrapped though." In the course of discussing Ken's piece, the group raises the possibility of another way that Ken could have written his piece. The response prompts Ken to read from an earlier draft--a draft substanially different from the piece he has just read to the group. During the course of the response, both writers, Ken and Alan, decide to use something from the earlier draft in the final version of the pieces that they are working on. They "re-evaluate and revise" as Murray's work suggests they should.

The new subcategory for response talk that emerges in the late session, "mock teacher voice," further suggests the shift in responsibilty to students for their own writing improvement. The subcategory occurs when the

students say things to each other that the teacher might say to them. For instance, Cliff says in responding to Kim's piece, "You have to be specific." Brian comments on this, "It's like he is kidding Kim but it is true. It's the kind of thing you expect the teacher to say."

The first group, the group that has met together consistently over the semester demonstrates the increased responsibility for teaching themselves to write that Murray has claimed as a benefit for small groups. Change over time for the first group is in the direction of greater ownership for the group sessions. By the late session students ask specific questions that they would like the group to respond to, they share earlier drafts of difficult parts of their papers, they bring the group back to the task of responding to their papers.

In the second group, there is not as much evidence of increased student responsibility for their own learning although there is some. David a member in the second group has commented in his log at the beginning of the semester, "I guess the group was okay, but I just like my paper to be marked and with it any comments on how I can change it or make it better." Near the end of the semester David's log indicates a change. He comments, "If you want to change it [your writing] you can, but if you don't you can leave it." David's comment reflects an understanding that, at least in

the small group, the decision to make changes in the writing rests with the writer.

By the late session of the second group the talk to the tape recorder has dropped out which can be seen as greater comfort with the taping, but can also be seen as evidence for the group moving in the direction of less external motivation (the teacher's requirement) and more internal motivation (using it to write better pieces). And it cannot be overlooked that by the late session the second group has dramatically increased the amount of talk in response to the pieces from 58% to 73%.

The Uses of the Talk

Students report in their logs a range of uses for the small groups. There are comments that indicate use simply on the level of reading aloud. As Alan says in his log, "By reading aloud you can realize yourself what doesn't make sense." Several comments are made in the logs regarding the value of the immediacy of the response.

Another use the group reports is getting an idea of what others write. Ken reports:

> I can see how the group involvement increases each week. We know more of what to say to each other and what will help out and what will not. Through hearing others' mistakes and good points it helps out each others' papers and gives ideas

> for our own. Maybe certain ways to present material or a certain voice to use.

For Kim the group response introduces her to the potential value of revision.

> Last spring I wrote a paper on architecture (term paper) I didn't like the way it turned out, but I never thought of writing it differently or from another view. The group lets me know what others think.

Cliff comments: "You get ideas of what to add and what to drop." For another writer, Alan, the help comes through suggestions of what not to change. Alan comments, "How they react to what you say helps you see what is working."

Group members do not all report the same response to the same session. Ken comments on a session in November.

> We talked over one of my new pieces and also heard Alan's final copy of "Special Lady." Cliff asked advice on different beginnings and we analyzed Kim's endings. I felt the group went very well today even better than usual. It might have been because everyone had specific material which they wished to cover. I felt my piece was liked by the group and I was encouraged to continue and we helped Cliff with his beginning.

Kim responds differently to this same session:

> The group didn't help me that much today or at least I didn't hear them if they did. I wasn't sure where I was headed in my two papers. They aren't too good, but I wasn't sure where to go with them.

They do not all report the same use nor the same value for each session. Groups may follow a pattern similar to the process of writing itself. There is an uneven quality to the writer's task; some writing sessions are more productive for some writers than others.

These writers report using the small group to think about ways to make their writing better. They read aloud to make sense; they get feedback quickly and then work further on the pieces; they get ideas from each other about subjects and approaches; they see others revising and experiment with their own revisions; they get ideas of what to add, what to drop, and what to leave alone; they use groups to explore problems they have encountered in their pieces; they use groups to think of new ideas.

The second group reported uses for the small groups as well. Dawn comments: "I really enjoy it. We always have fun and it enables me to hand in a better paper."

Another writer, David, reports getting ideas even when he has no paper to share.

> Everybody read their paper except me because I

> don't have any idea on how to write it. Now I do. After hearing what three persons just read.

Dawn comments that she specifically learned, "to get to the point and to use the active voice."

Dawn, Tracy, and Leisa all comment on the use of the group as a "comfortable place to read" and refer to a piece that Leisa read about her uncle. The piece was so emotional for Leisa that she had cried as she read. The small group is viewed as safer than the whole class for this kind of reading--something that is important to the writer, but emotion-laden.

Nina comments on the usefulness to her of a group response.

> I like this particular group because even though my paper wasn't finished, they sort of helped me to try to put an ending on the story. They kind of got the general idea of what I was trying to say in my paper which was even though me and Pam are different in color, we are really no different when it comes to being a person. This small group today really helped me see that because this was not very clear to me until today.

For Nina, her own meaning becomes clearer as she hears the group talk about her paper. As Britton (1970) and Collins

(1981) suggest such explaining to oneself is important in learning to write.

Writers in this group also report using the group for an immediate response. Dawn comments, "I like them [small groups] because we don't have to keep on handing them in and waiting for a response." Of the same session Dawn comments regarding useful information she received, "This was a great small group today. Michael gave me real good ideas on my paper. He also gave me some sentences I might consider to re-word because he didn't understand them."

Members of both groups report uses for the talk. Their uses include: to get response to the papers; to get ideas; to get immediate response; to share pieces that are too emotional for full class sharing; to get specific information on writing concerns such as beginnings, endings, sentence structure; and there is talk that allows them to realize more fully their own intended meanings in a piece.

Ethnographic Interview

The student logs turned up the student's self-perceptions of the uses they made of the group sessions. But often self-reports limit what we can discover to that which is at a conscious level; that is, to those things we can recognize by name. It was the ethnographic method that allowed this study to push beyond what group

members were able to say, to a closer look at what they were acting out in the small groups.

One of the most interesting uses turned up by the ethnographic investigation is the way in which writers use talk to mediate between thinking and writing.

In the early meeting of the first group the respondent refers to a section in the small group session that he differentiates from Alan's expected turn. (See Figure 2). The expected turn, Brian labels Alan's "forced turn", while the section coming after that Brian calls Alan's "real turn."

Alan is the last to take his turn. He has some difficulty finding the paper that he plans to read to the group that day so there is a section called "the interlude." After Alan has found his paper he begins his turn by reading the draft. In Alan's case there are several parts making up his draft. He reads the four parts explaining a little about each one. Then the discussion continues.

> Alan: See, I didn't really start as an introduction. My first paragraph isn't really an introduction.
>
> Kim: Okay
>
> Alan: It's all kind of like the middle somewhere. It's somewhere in the body, all these are

somewhere in the body.

Cliff: In the body of it, yeah.

Alan: It's not really an introduction cause see I didn't really know how to start it and not sound too corny at the same time you know

Cliff: So you say this here is the middle right?

Alan: Yeah

Cliff: That's a good middle right there. That sounds interesting to me. Kept my attention.

Alan: Hmmmmm

They go on discussing the parts that Alan has read. Alan wants more, however.

Alan: I don't know. I'm gonna have to...it's hard to tell I have to decide which way I'm gonna go. It's hard for anybody to say where to go unless I have more, cause there's hardly anything

Kim: Does it help you at all?

Alan: Yeah, well it's pretty much what she (the teacher) said, too. I just have to come up with more instances or something like that.

The turn seems to be winding down when Alan suddenly asks

Alan: Have you ever been to Akron Falls Park?

It is this sudden switch to Akron Falls Park that marks the start of the "real turn" as Brian labels it. Brian comments on it this way:

Then it was weird how all of a sudden Alan just wanted to get that out, "Have you ever been to Akron Falls Park?". That's something new. It just seemed to me he listened to all their conversation and it's like he's "Yeah well that's pretty much what she said too" when he was saying that it's like he was listening to Kim and Cliff and stuff and soaking it all in, but it's like it's sort of like he already heard all that stuff from you, the teacher and it's all of a sudden he blurts out what he probably wanted to say all along, "Have you ever been to Akron's park?" It's still Alan's turn, but it's like the other part was Alan's forced turn, but all that as soon as he finds his paper from even the interlude, that's all part of Alan's forced turn. That's what's going on in his forced turn, it's all forced because that's not really what Alan wanted to hear. I think he wanted to talk about Akron Falls Park and I don't know did he incorporate that into his piece? ... Well, when all of a sudden that just pops in it's like he's not just asking if they've ever been to Akron Falls Park, it's like he's asking them almost if he can put this in his paper and would that be interesting.

He tells a big chunk about it and there's laughter and they're just talking about it and I think that's something he wanted to see if it was worth writing down on paper.

During Alan's "forced turn", the turn that as Brian says is "doing what the class is set up to do", Alan gets response to his piece, but Alan seems to want something more from the group. The segment that the respondent labelled as the "real turn" follows:

Alan: Have you ever been to Akron Falls Park?

Cliff: Yeah

Alan: Have you ever been at the falls falls?

Cliff: No, I never been to it. I heard of it though

Alan: It's only about sixty feet up, but

Cliff: I've heard of it

Alan: She used to live near Akron and we were there for this like picnic with some people we knew and she was there and it was right after this girl from school fell off for some reason and she ended up killing herself, you know

Cliff: Yeah, I've heard

Alan: And I was up there and we were just gonna climb the rocks and she's standing on the other side and yelling at me and telling me that I'm

gonna fall down and kill myself and I go okay if that's what I wannna do that's what I wanna do. (They laugh) I was being real wise and she was... I just couldn't take a girl telling me...

Cliff: Yeah, she's younger than you and a girl

Alan: You know if you're gonna climb on rocks you're gonna climb on the rocks, You know they're dangerous, but you don't really care. But a...

Cliff: You were a wild little kid (laughing) climbing rocks, throwing crabapples at cars (referring to another piece Alan has shared in class)

Alan: No, it wasn't ... they're semi-dangerous, but it's like you know, not that dangerous. It's really not that high.

Cliff: Just something you wanted to do.

Alan; It's not higher than the third story around here

Kim: You climb those?

Alan: Yeah, but it's ...there's a falls and then there's a ...it's just like there's a pool where everything falls and it just come over like a small little waterway

Cliff: Yeah

Alan continues to describing how kids dive into the deep

part of the water, but he brings it back to what he wants to talk about.

Alan: It's like there are rocks here, but it's like real straight and then there's rocks up here just like a small ledge and I think this is where she was when she fell. She didn't hit it right. But over here it's just like it goes up a hill, almost. There's rocks you could fall down, but it wasn't that dangerous. It was like climbing a ledge or walking about two feet away from here or something like that, but she just started yelling.

Cliff: Get down, get down

Alan: Yeah

Cliff: You said when they get drunk they don't perform as well (Laughter)

Alan: It's like you know ...some kind of authority and that, especially when you're fourteen. You don't care.

Kim: Yeah

Alan: Especially by somebody younger than you

Kim: Yeah right

Cliff: Hey, who can tell you what to do at fourteen

Alan: Yeah

Kim: Yeah

Cliff: And somebody younger than you

Kim: It's like somebody trying to tell you not to throw crabapples at cars when you're older than they are (referring to an earlier piece by Alan)

Kim: Or people tell me don't go running at night, don't go running out at night

Alan: Look both ways before you cross the street. Yeah, somebody about seventeen years old look both ways before you cross the street. (Laughter) Brian, comments on the "real turn."

Yeah, I think just to talk through his ideas. I mean I'm sure you know he's got something in his memory about this and that's what he's got to get down on paper. For him maybe it was easier to visualize it and speak it out loud to other people and elicit their responses, facial, and yeah, yeah and how they say this and that and the cadence of their voices. They're all upbeat "yeahs" and there's laughter...He's using them for like a writer's think tank.

Alan is using exploratory talk to help him think about what he wants to write. This segment is characterized by group re-enforcement with laughter. Cliff's restatement grants Alan permission to proceed. There are large chunks

of discourse. He is using expressive speech to help him think about what it is he wants to say in his writing.

Alan's final draft, a four-page, typed paper after a total of twenty-six, handwritten pages of drafting shows evidence of Alan's thinking through talk. The incident he has related in the "real turn" becomes his beginning, but it is more than just another incident piled on top of earlier ones. It becomes the organizing force for the paper. Alan's early difficulty with the parts had to do with making the connections between seemingly unrelated parts. After Alan's chance to talk through this incident, he writes a draft that not only has a new beginning, but that has the previously unrelated parts in an organizational frame that makes sense of their connections to one another. The final piece begins like this:

Special Lady

> After walking to the foot of the falls, my friend and I started to climb up along side them. We were about half way up when I heard Cathy yell, "You're gonna fall and kill yourselves." Being the smart aleck kid I was, I yelled, "I can kill myself if I want to!"
>
> This happened at a picnic I was at about eight years ago. After we had walked to the end of the nature trail, we decided to climb next to the

falls. We weren't bothering anyone when Cathy blasted me with her mother knows best logic. From this incident I acquired a strong dislike for Kathy, but surprisingly, my feelings have changed over time.

The turning point came about two years later when I needed to learn how to dance. A party was given by an acquaintance who belonged to a group of friends who I admired and wanted to be accepted by. So I used Cathy to teach me. But the dancing practice led me to see how she had changed. She had a pretty face with shiny brown eyes.

Alan judged this to be the best piece he had written over the semester. He later read it to his small group who approved of the changes he had made. The "real turn" demonstrates the power and importance of the speaking part of the speaking-listening connection in small group interactions. It is often the expectation that the benefit from the small group will come only from the advice that the listeners can pass on to the writer. In Alan's case, the benefit for him comes in his chance to use talk to help him think about his writing. The addition of the incident at the beginning of the piece not only solves Alan's problem of adding incidents to develop Kathy in the piece,

but it also provides the organizational structure that will enable Alan to connect incidents that have occurred over time.

Conclusions

This study adds to our understanding of the nature of talk in small group writing workshops; the ways talk changes over time; and the use students make of such talk. Talk during the small response groups in this study was on task. By the late sessions three quarters of the talk in both groups was talk in response to the student writing. Talk in the category climate talk is not simply talk off task, but instead builds the structure that carries the talk in response to the pieces.

The talk in this study changes over time. There is evidence of students taking greater responsibility for their own learning. Students use the groups to explore possiblities in their writing. Talk in response to the papers covered the full range of writing concerns from lower order transcriptive problems to higher order concerns over rhetorical choices and arrangement decisions.

The use of the talk as in the case of Alan suggests a shift in our usual assumption that the value of the small group response is in what is said to the writer. The "real turn" demonstrates the power and importance of the speaking part of the speaking listening connection in small group

interactions. In Alan's case the benefit comes in his chance to use talk to think about his writing. His use of talk, the verbal elaborating to the groups, leads him from his present understanding, his implicit sense of what he wants to say, to comprehended knowledge which he can then make explicit in his writing.

Jacobs and Karliner (1977) have found that many college freshman papers have minimal problems of spelling, grammar, and punctuation, but the papers frequently lack evidence of careful thinking by the writer. When discussing the roles of students in student-teacher conferences, Jacobs and Karliner suggest that when there is need for more thorough thinking about a topic the student needs to be the main speaker, the initiator, the framer of the talk. This study suggests a similar conclusion for small group interaction. When the writer is struggling with higher order concerns as Alan is during his real turn it is Alan who becomes the main speaker, the initiator, the one who frames the talk. The present study reaffirms the potential value of small group response sessions in the classroom. The ethnographic inquiry has allowed us to see the small group interaction through a new and powerful lens.

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